
LINDA LINDROTH

*MULTIPLE DISSENTIONS:
Linda Lindroth's Embedded Imagery*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

On April 11, 1957 Minor White dropped a white porcelain rice bowl on his kitchen floor — it broke. On October 12, 1983, Linda Lindroth brought into the Polaroid camera studio at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School: dozens of tubes of acrylic paint, conté crayons, two shopping bags filled with various wires, a baby carriage wheel, fan blades, a baby bottle, bits of plastic, rubber, silvery metals and copper, a car ashtray and a myriad of flattened and aged rummage rescued from city gutters, trash bins and beaches, along with epoxy to glue this mélange of detritus to styrofoam insulation panels. Camera, objects, paints, epoxy and photographer vied for space in the studio, a studio which was to become the site of a sort of photo-performance.

What did these two events have in common? Metamorphosis. Minor White, in an excerpt from his diary entry from that fateful day, enlightens us:

The swift drop to the floor signalled eager forces into play: gravity was the trigger, clay and shape the material, the loving hand that shaped the bowl — had unconsciously stored an unguessed form in it. With the crash transmutation worked, metamorphosis took a deep breath and an object found itself. The death of the bowl was the birth of the object.¹

The 'new object,' created in a split-second of carelessness, was subsequently photographed by White. Further diary entries that day inquire:

What is the status of a photograph of an object that has just found its own form? A copy? Or a photograph that in turn would find a form peculiar to itself?²

Analogously, artist-photographer Linda Lindroth assisted everyday objects, in various states of repair, to find forms peculiar to themselves. On October 12th, she had brought her odd selection of materials, and those four styrofoam panels, into the Polaroid studio in Boston. The four panels had been previously painted gray and already had some objects, paint and drawing on them. They awaited additional transformations.

The process of making these colorful reliefs was, for Lindroth, as important as the finished pieces. Like Minor White, she photographed the end result, using Polaroid's formidable 20-by-24 inch instant-print camera. An event, Lindroth's 'performance' in the Polaroid studio, took on structure in triptych series. Diachrony and synchrony were meshed, forming the warp and weft of whole project. These activities of Lindroth's, the collecting and collaging of objects, resembled that of the *bricoleur*, of whom Claude Lévi-Strauss has commented:

He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials... He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize...³

In Lindroth's objects, it is always earlier ends (the practical functions of those objects) which are called upon to play the part of means (elements in formal compositions) through their esthetic recontextualization. This is what Lévi-Strauss calls *bricolage*.

While White's theoretical 'ivory tower' was really more a Buddhist zendo due to his appropriation of Zen philosophy, Lindroth's 'tower' (colorfully decorated with paint and found objects like a Rauschenberg and or a Johns *combine*) reaches towards the theoretical stratosphere of post-modernism, for her concern is (among other things) with foregrounding the problematic of photographic representation. If there is a concern for an 'equivalent' in her artwork, it is with the uneasy visual equivalence between collage and its nearly one-to-one translation onto Polaroid's Polacolor ER 20-by-24 inch Land Film. Although a spiritually-charged equivalence between image, photographer and viewer is not touted here, the objects embedded in Lindroth's sets arouse memories (I will discuss this more fully later). For the most part, however, Lindroth's investigation of representation remains on a material level, rather than on some arcane level of symbolism as championed by Alfred Stieglitz, Minor White, and Frederick Sommer.

Each photographic process known throughout the history of photography has had its own peculiar syntax (as pointed out by William Crawford in his book, *The Keepers of Light*), a syntax that photographers had to either work against or make good use of in producing significant photographs. The daguerreotype was both praised and condemned for its ability to render fine detail: praised for its near syntactical transparency, which lent an evidential force to the image, and disparaged for its corresponding lack of evidence of any creating, controlling, personalizing hand behind the technology. Today, with the manufacture of Polaroid's massive Land Camera, housed in Boston and used to produce this portfolio, the possibility of achieving a near syntaxless photograph again becomes an issue of esthetic potential and critical debate. Here Minor White's query as to the status of a photograph of that broken bowl (is it a copy, or a photograph that in turn would find a form peculiar to itself?) strikes me as anticipating the representational ambiguities Lindroth plays with in her large photographic triptychs when she embeds image-within-image.

II. EARLIER WORK:

Since 1973, Lindroth has used the camera to document things. Her *American Portraits* series (1979) were 65-by-50 inch portraits of people she knew combined with excerpts from their personal stories. Later, she turned to the American landscape, still employing a documentary attitude, doing a survey of Santa Catalina Island off the Southern California coast. Documentary work on the Jersey Meadows near New York soon followed. By 1982, however, Lindroth had begun to set her documentary images in tension with found objects, objects she had attached to a painted canvas that then became a sort of colorful relief-like mat surrounding a large black and white photograph. In comparison with the relief qualities of the surrounding canvas border, the photos within seemed like slices of the 'real world.' The obvious painterly syntax of the mat repressed the optical syntax of the photograph embedded within. Two wholly different syntactical zones were thus grafted together, the photograph 'becalming' the central region of the otherwise zappy collage.

III. RECENT TRIPTYCHS:

Lindroth's most recent works, these masterful triptychs, reverse the relationship between photograph and painterly passage. The painterly area has now become the central focus, the black and white photograph the surrounding mat. But a refinement has occurred as well. Unlike the previous *combines*, these new triptychs are totally photographic: the central painterly collage is actually an extremely detailed slice of 'reality.' That reality, a gray slab of paint-splattered and object-encrusted styrofoam, was subjected to exposures at three different stages in its construction, the three shots forming the rationale for the triptychs. In Lindroth's planning of the construction and photo-documentation of these mixed-media pieces, a game is given the stature of a ritual. The almost same-size reproduction ratio is maintained during the ritual and the lighting on the sets are kept quite flat. One asks: is it a painting, a photograph, or an actual relief? Visible are: brushstrokes, epoxy drips, pins, and (as Lindroth comments) "even the dust of the conté crayons that I use to smear around objects." Unexpected visual delights resulted when the assemblages were photographed: copper paint and

any chrome objects took on a fluorescence not seen in the 'flesh.' The actual was intensified, re-actualized in the act of 'translation.'

Here is a pictorial space of *multiple dissentions*. Only close inspection, or tactile confirmation can settle the representational ambiguities inherent in these pieces. Yet just as one discovers that "here is a flat simulacrum," the print's material surface once again becomes transparent (as windowpane does when a landscape is viewed beyond it) and one seems to be confronting a low relief.

These colorful rectangles are, remember, embedded in an even larger black and white photographic print. This recontextualization permits the viewer to contrast this monochromatic and world-depicting snapshot with the more abstract Polaroid print in the center. The result is that, by comparison, the abstract composition appears less an optical trace than the monochromatic counterpart surrounding it. The net result is that two mutually interactive readings occur, a systole/diastole that becomes the heartbeat of these triptychs. Lindroth has put it nicely: "...the viewer then sees a photograph of an object that is really not like that object at all — it is, as Garry Winogrand has said, 'an illusion of a literal description'." Roland Barthes, by way of contrast, was sensitive to only one moment of this dialectic, the contractive phase, when he said:

In the photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else...⁴

He ignored the expansive phase in which meanings enlarge and the photograph becomes that "something else." It is this heartbeat that keeps Lindroth's triptychs alive, vital.

Yet the impastoed paint, the collaged objects, are not there solely as a foil to the more obvious photographic syntax; they are sensual, emotional (Lindroth prefers "musical") in their formal qualities. As both arrangements prior to being translated into two-dimensions, and as Polaroids alone, they are handsome compositions. One can't help be seduced by the color saturation and contrasts, the arrangement of the parts. Similarly, the large black and white prints in which these Polaroids are usually embedded show a compositional élan that gives away the fact that this photographer had studied with the late Garry Winogrand. Speaking of Winogrand, prior to his

untimely death, Lindroth had commented that he "is one of the most physical photographers I know and I believe he is trained as a dancer." Something of her own physical vitality (Lindroth is very active physically) is carried into her own visual productions. A complex network of balances between objects and pigment, a complexity that increases with successive panels, produces that compositional musicality of which Lindroth had mentioned.

The act of producing these collages in the studio, and subsequently photographing them, results in that performative dimension I had alluded to earlier in this essay. The triptychs are *event-object* complexes. Since each Polaroid in any triptych was taken at different moments in the production of the collage, one can read temporal progression and the transition from the simple to the complex in any threesome. Against the stasis, the sheer synchrony, associated with painting, these photographs of a process emphasize the contingent, for at what moment can one say the panel is completed? (Some prefer the initial exposure for its simplicity, others the last for its richness of detail and complexity.) Lindroth understands all three phases as vitally linked, enjoying the progression as a trace of her own performative proclivities. (I've stressed the documentary nature of these pieces, as Lindroth's earlier work has always been involved in some aspect of recording things or events.) This newer work refines, or better, problematizes what it means to produce a photographic record. It is this dimension of her recent work that suggests its proximity to postmodernist attitudes.

IV. THE WORKS:

The first triptych to embed the large Polaroids was titled by Lindroth: *The Bronx Zoo Triptych* (1983-84), after the site encompassing the color prints. (Each successive panel in the triptychs is labelled: *I-1*, *I-2*, and *I-3*, respectively; so *B.Z.T./I-1* refers to the first of the 43-by-57 inch panels.) There is humor, irony and formal ploy behind the artist's decision to imprison her elegant, colorful designs within a scene shot in a prison for exotic animals. The zoo is usually frequented most often by the lower and middle classes, while art museums are attended more regularly by the upper classes. There is irony here in embedding 'fine art paintings' within a cultural



Bronx Zoo Triptych. Panel 1 incorporating Polaroid I-1. 43" X 57"

space used to contain/display "the cute," "the exotic," and "the ferocious" (clichés which often slip into the discourse of art). An art gallery is an antiseptic zone, but a zoo reeks of curious smells, including hot buttered popcorn and dung — an incongruous mixture of odors that repeats the artworks' formal incongruities. Two visual texts — zoo and high art — couldn't be more opposed to each other, and yet clever formal juxtapositioning suggests a spatial connection between the two photographic passages.

For instance, in *B.Z.T./I-1* the Polaroid appears to be a massive canvas balancing on a diminutive ladder on one side, while on the other, it is held up by a tree. Swinging out overhead, much smaller in scale than any of the objects stuck to her collage, is a skyway transport bucket. The suspended bucket formally repeats the suspen-

sion of objects within Lindroth's photographed collage. It is as if an object has flown off the full-color collage and entered the black and white zone, changing chameleon-like from color to monochrome in the process.

Furry ears pop up from behind the left corner of its embedded Polaroid, while bare human legs, shod in leather sandals, protrude beneath. Part animal, part human, part art, this mytho-photographic creature — stalking about in its fabricated lair in *B.Z.T./I-2* — is assembled Frankenstein-like from fragments of the visual world. The most humorous of all the panels, *I-2* plays with the possibilities of a world in which normally stable signs are re-shuffled. How the world would look photographed is taken to comic lengths here. Like the other panels, *I-2* is an esthetically-charged site upon which the artist



Bronx Zoo Triptych. Panel 2 incorporating Polaroid I-2. 43" X 57"

has collected fragments, excerpts, of visual material culled from painting's and photography's recent past. They are marvelous *pastiches* (a term once deprecatory, now more positively referring to *meta-generic* production, a characteristic of postmodernist practice). For instance, in this panel a hand, severely cropped by the frame's left edge, protrudes into the pictorial space, a self-conscious formal quotation lifted from the rhetoric of street photography.

In deciphering the visual sources quoted by Lindroth, I was reminded of a statement made by Charles Baudelaire in his essay *Salon of 1846*: "...art is a mnemotechny of the beautiful." Lindroth's pieces invoke our involuntary memory, recalling not only earlier artworks, but (through the inclusion of objects from our childhood) events from our personal past. Yet she

accomplishes this without mystification, a mystification seen in Frederick Sommer's and Clarence John Laughlin's esthetic which infuses the everyday with suggestions of the otherworldly.

The final stage in Lindroth's in-studio performance is embedded in the center of *B.Z.T./I-3*. In this panel, what appears to be a gopher reclines on the grass, oblivious to the presence of art (the Polacolor) in its domain. However, the varmint is actually not so small; it is a *capybara*, an unusual animal the scale of a medium-sized dog! In a world subjected to photographic interpretation appearances may be deceiving. In these triptychs, Lindroth delights in playing with optical distortions of scale. (In *B.Z.T./I-1* as well, the camera optics lead one to believe in the miniaturization of what is actually a life-sized ladder.) The embedded Polaroid print, even more so than



Bronx Zoo Triptych. Panel 3 incorporating Polaroid I-3. 43" X 57"

the other panels, is an anomaly in the context in which it floats, defying gravity and rational explanation. Yet that curious zoo animal, sitting on the grass nearby, could care less.

In *Scarlet A* (a single panel, not a triptych), an artwork appears to be rolling contentedly alongside a high, time-worn wall on which a torn fragment of advertising reads: CANDY. A dignified looking light pole on the left lends a scale comparison, suggesting that the embedded color print is just as tall as it. The combination of tricycle tire, baby doll's head, and metals fragments in the collage suggests that I am watching a child wheel along a grassy boulevard when suddenly, as if on a L.S.D. flashback, she and her vehicle explode into a psychedelic panoply of colorful debris. There is something decidedly different here than in the zoo triptych; the forms are dis-

turbing in a way that the triptych panels are not. Here's an objectification of a psychological landscape steeped in more personal revelation and social comment than seen in her other panels. For instance, the large red A glued in the collage and the title of the piece are lifted from a textual source, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (a tract on the corrosive power of guilt and hypocrisy in a society unwilling to face the realities of love and passion). That red A's flourished cross-stroke is compositionally used to stand-in for the child's spine, a red spine from which her little doll head has been compositionally severed. The bright colors try to, but cannot, mask the underlying pain in this piece.



Scarlet A (imbedded in Wall—East Hampton, NY, 1983.) 43" X 57"

V. CONCLUSION

The metamorphosis that was common to both Minor White's dropping and re-photographing of his porcelain bowl and Lindroth's activities in the Polaroid studio both resulted in a work of photographic art. But only incidentally did Minor White comment upon the 'performance' underlying the photograph he made that day. Lindroth, however, emphasizes this process as an integral part of her triptychs. Event + structure are enmeshed in a way that Minor White only glimpsed at, relegating the event to scribbles in his diary entry of April 11, 1957. More recent photographic practitioners are pulling into their sphere of interest aspects of photographic activity previously ignored or marginalized. Linda Lindroth is one such practitioner.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹Minor White, "Found Photographs," in *Photography: Essays & Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 307.
 - ²White, ed. Newhall, p. 307.
 - ³Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 18.
 - ⁴Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 4.
- All Lindroth quotes are taken from correspondence with the artist.